

Committee on Resources

Testimony

Testimony of MAGGIE B. COON
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The Nature Conservancy
on HR. 1477
before the
House Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands
Chaired by the Honorable James V. Hansen
October 9, 1997

Chairman Hansen and members of the subcommittee, I greatly appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today in support of HR.1477.

The Nature Conservancy is a private, non-profit organization committed to preserving plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. We have over 33,000 members in Washington State and 900,000 nationally.

The Nature Conservancy considers protection of the Hanford Reach of the Columbia River an issue of national significance because of the extraordinary ecological values at stake on both the Reach and the adjacent lands of the Hanford Reservation. We support designation of the Hanford Reach as a recreational river under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, as outlined in HR. 1477. We also endorse permanent establishment of the North Slope as a national wildlife refuge and see this step as crucial to protection of the Reach itself. We believe U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service management is the very best way to safeguard the biological, cultural and recreational treasures of both the Hanford Reach and the North Slope.

Ecological and Cultural Values of the Hanford Reach and North Slope

Flowing 1,214 miles from its origins in Canada to the Pacific Ocean, the Columbia is the fourth largest river in North America. In the United States, the 51-mile Hanford Reach is the last free-flowing stretch of this great river above Bonneville Dam. The significance of the Reach as both a migration corridor and spawning bed for the Northwest's dwindling stocks of salmon is well documented. Sixty percent of the fall chinook in the mainstem of the Columbia - a major portion of the region's commercial salmon fishery - spawn in the Hanford Reach. These fish are an important component of commercial harvests that are the subject of international treaty negotiations with Canada.

In addition to providing critical spawning habitat, the Hanford Reach serves as a migration corridor for coho and sockeye salmon, steelhead, and spring and summer chinook salmon. Northern Columbia River Steelhead, including stocks inhabiting and migrating through the Reach, were recently listed by the National Marine Fisheries Service under the Endangered Species Act. Nearly 40 other native and introduced fish inhabit this stretch of river, including several Washington state species of special concern. These fish stocks form the backbone of the recreational resources the Reach provides.

The Reach and the Hanford lands through which it flows form a complex, interwoven ecosystem that is increasingly rare. On a satellite image of Eastern Washington, the Hanford site emerges as an island in a sea of human activity. Agricultural development, the Columbia Basin's dominant land use, laps at its borders, manicured orchards extending as far as the eye can see. Conservancy scientists have discovered this is no ordinary island, but an extraordinary place, rich in plant and animal diversity.

Ongoing biological inventories of the Hanford lands, conducted by The Nature Conservancy, in cooperation with the Department of Energy, have discovered 30 species new to science. These include a plant species on the North Slope that grows nowhere else in the world. In addition, these studies have documented at least 61 plant and animal species considered Species of Concern in Washington. Over 200 species of birds rely on the Reach and its surrounding shrub-steppe habitats. Among the many discoveries were 21 species of ladybird beetles, insects useful as biological control agents. In 1996, the Ecological Society of America, a scientific society with over 7,000 members, reported that ungrazed shrub-steppe, such as that found adjacent to the Reach, is one of our nation's most critically endangered ecosystems.

Hanford's legacy is more than ecological. Its lands are also of great historical significance. More than 150 registered archeological sites - the remains of Native American villages and early pioneer settlements - dot the shoreline of the Reach. Structures along the south shore of the river chronicle the important history of the Manhattan Project.

Benefits of Protection and Stewardship

In addition to protecting the region's unique natural heritage, designation of the Reach as a National Wild and Scenic River and the North Slope as a National Wildlife Refuge would convey significant recreational and economic benefits to the region.

Recreational benefits would include:

- Increased recreational access to and recreational use of the Hanford Reach.
- Continued fishing opportunities at the Columbia River's most popular upstream sport-fishing area. The river's last great natural salmon run, the fall chinook, thrives at this critical spawning area and attracts thousands of anglers each season.
- Improved wildlife viewing opportunities through wildlife habitat protection and restoration programs.
- Reduced illegal or inappropriate uses of Hanford's natural and cultural resources.
- Increased visitor enjoyment.

Economic benefits would include:

- Conservation of prime native spawning habitat. At a time when State and Federal government agencies are spending millions on salmon rehabilitation, conserving the Hanford Reach fisheries makes sense ecologically *and* economically. The destruction of this habitat would burden taxpayers with expensive mitigation measures.
- Preservation of the largest remaining shrub-steppe tract in Washington State. Protecting Hanford's native vegetation would help offset loss of shrub-steppe habitat in other areas of central Washington, such as that resulting from increased activity - and subsequent disturbance and wildfires - at the Yakima Training Center.
- Enhancement of Washington's billion dollar "wildlife industry," which includes hunting, sport fishing and wildlife-watching. In 1991, the tourist industry was the third largest employment sector in the

Hanford Reach area, accounting directly for nearly 1900 jobs according to the "Hanford Reach of the Columbia River Comprehensive River Conservation Study and Environmental Impact Statement" prepared by the U.S. National Park Service in June 1994.

Threats of Agricultural Development on the North Slope

The North Slope lands along the Hanford Reach are one of the few, large intact parcels of shrub-steppe land remaining in eastern Washington. Yet some have proposed converting more than 50,000 acres of these lands to irrigated farmland. Allowing agricultural development to encroach on the North Slope would threaten the fragile and unique shrub-steppe and aquatic habitats of the Slope and Reach.

Ecological threats of agricultural development include:

- **Irrigation-induced landslides.** According to a 1987 report by the U.S. Geological Survey, the remarkable White Bluffs along the north shore of the Reach have experienced significant landslide activity caused primarily by wastewater seepage from nearby irrigated croplands.
- **Siltation and burial of salmon spawning beds.** Landslides induced by irrigation have buried some of the fall chinook spawning beds along the Reach. The problem would likely worsen with increased irrigation.
- **Fragmentation and loss of native shrub-steppe habitat.** As detailed above, the North Slope lands are home to numerous native plants and animals, many of which are rare or threatened throughout their range.
- **Spread of weeds and pesticides.** Intentional or accidental spread of chemicals and introduction of weeds would alter or damage plant communities, in turn displacing native wildlife. In addition, presence of humans and farm animals in the area would disrupt native communities.

Passage of HR. 1477 is an important first step in the process of protecting the irreplaceable natural resources found on the Hanford Reservation. Protection of the Reach and Hanford lands poses an unusually complex set of challenges. It involves working at the local, state and federal level with a host of organizations and public agencies. The Conservancy will continue to provide decisionmakers with the overwhelming scientific evidence for protecting the Hanford Reach and the North Slope. In so doing, we hope to help create a new vision for this remarkable place and begin to transform Hanford's symbolic legacy.

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